

WOMEN IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE OF INDIA

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The literature for children in India has its origin in the oral tradition. India's *Panchatantra*, the oldest collection of stories for children in the world, derives from this oral tradition. These stories are known to have existed for at least 5000 years. Vishnu Sharma wrote these stories in five books or the *Panchatantra* for the instruction of three foolish sons of an ancient king. The *Panchatantra* comprises of eighty four stories and many more inserted stories.

Most of the stories in the *Panchatantra* are animal stories with adult characters, but some have human characters also. The stories have very few female characters and their role, animal or human, is confined to the traditional roles of a mother, wife, beloved, sister or daughter. The girl child as the central character has been ignored completely. Females are less present in these stories and the male is the centre of attention. The man is the doer, and eventually saves the day. In *Monkey and the Crocodile*, one of the most translated *Panchatantra* stories, the crocodile decides to eat up his friend the monkey. He invites the monkey to his home across the river. The monkey takes a ride on the crocodile's back. In the middle of the river, he tells the monkey that his wife would like to eat the monkey's heart. The monkey being clever, tells the crocodile that he should have told this to him earlier because he (the monkey) had left behind his heart on the tree. The monkey thus saves himself. In the story, the monkey's wife has been portrayed as an evil person.

In another story in the *Panchatantra*, a saint finds a mouse and brings her home. He has no child, and his wife adopts the mouse after he turns her into a little girl. When she grows up, the saint

looks for a bridegroom for her. First he invites the Sun, the mightiest of all. The girl rejects him and desires someone more powerful than the Sun. The Sun suggests the name of Cloud as he alone can overshadow the Sun. As soon as the girl sees the Cloud, she rejects him for he is too gloomy. Cloud suggests Wind's name who can drive away Cloud whenever he wants. The girl rejects the Wind, saying that he is too fickle. Wind then suggests Mountain who can stop Wind. Along with their daughter, the saint and his wife go to Mountain. No sooner than the girl sees the Mountain she rejects him saying that he is lazy and immobile. Now Mountain suggests Mouse, who can bore through his body. The saint then invites Mouse and the girl approves of him. The saint turns his daughter back into a female mouse and marries her to Mouse.

Apart from the *Panchatantra*, there is a vast reservoir of traditional stories based on mythology, classics and folktales for the entertainment of the young and old alike. Indian art and literature developed over the centuries for the enjoyment of the entire family and children were treated as an integral part of the family. Stories from the oral literature provided material for the story telling sessions at the family get togethers.

In another story, Vidyottama was the beautiful and highly learned daughter of a king in ancient India. When she attained marriageable age, her father invited wise and learned young men. Vidyottama decided to meet them personally and talk to them. In the end, she found that none of the wise and learned men could measure up to her expectations and she rejected all of them. The defeated men conspired against her and brought a

foolish person who they had found cutting the same branch of a tree on which he was sitting. They told the princess that the man had taken a vow of silence and would only talk to her using the sign language. The princess asked questions in sign language and the foolish man too replied in the same manner. The conspirators cleverly interpreted the replies and the princess was satisfied. Soon she was married to the foolish man. On reaching her husband's place she discovered that she was actually married to a foolish man. She was so disgusted that one night she turned him out of the house. The foolish husband was shocked and he decided to study and acquire knowledge. He spent years studying literature and seeking guidance from wise men and became a learned man himself. After several years, one night he returned and knocked at Vidyottama's door and called her. Vidyottama recognized her husband's voice and opened the door. This learned husband later became the foremost litterateur in the Sanskrit language, and his name is Kalidas.

In the traditional literatures, before a girl was married, her place was inside the house with her mother. She would learn the household tasks and eventually prepare herself for marriage and family life. On the other hand, boys were sent away to the *gurus* (teachers) to learn and study. The identity of a girl was only visible when she grew up and attained marriageable age. The grownup girls were free to visit temples, fairs and celebrations with their girl friends. They would wear colourful dresses and decorate their hair with fragrant flowers and also roam around for fun and frolic. This gave them the opportunity to meet young boys. A girl was given the choice to select her husband. The prospective bridegrooms were invited over, and the girl could assert herself and make decisions concerning her marriage.

This life of a girl leading to her marriage has remained a theme in traditional stories. The marriage ceremony was often held by way of a

swayamvar (selecting one's own spouse). The father of the princess in question would invite princes from different kingdoms, and anyone who excelled in the display of his prowess or some other skill with arms would win the hand of the princess. In the classic epic *Ramayan*, King Janak's daughter Sita once moved a very heavy bow. Janak saw this, and he decided to select a groom for her on condition that the prospective bridegroom should lift this very bow. Soon a *swayamvar* was arranged. The bow was kept in the court. Ram alone could lift the bow and he also broke it into two and won Sita's hand.

There was also another kind of marriage, the *gandharva* marriage, where the girl would choose her spouse without consulting anybody including her father, as in the story of Shakuntala, in a play called *Abhijyan Shakuntalam* written by Kalidas in Sanskrit.

Shakuntala was the adopted daughter of a bachelor saint, Kanva. Kanva had found the baby girl abandoned by her parents in a forest. Kanva adopted this girl and named her Shakuntala. Once, while roaming with her friends in the adjoining forest, she met a young and handsome king, Dushyant, who had come for hunting. They fell in love and got married in *gandharva* style. In due course, Shakuntala gave birth to a son and named him Bharat. Bharat later became a king. The country was named Bharatvarsh (earlier name of India which is used even now) after his name Bharat. There are a large number of stories of love and romance in India's traditional literature which nearly always end up in a happy life together.

In almost all these stories, the life of the woman was tied up with that of her husband and the family. She was to bring up valiant sons and was an upholder of tradition. The sons were often recognized not only by their father's name but also by their mother's name. Ram, the hero of *Ramayan* was called Kaushalyanandan (son of Kaushalya).

Krishna derived a name from his real mother Devkinandan (son of Devki), and also his foster mother, Yashodanandan (Yashoda's son). The stories on these themes portray great motherhood.

In quite a few stories, pretty women have often been portrayed as charmers and were used as temptresses to deter people from reaching their goals. Menaka, a beautiful dancer in King Indra's court was sent to distract Vishwamitra. She succeeded in doing so and later gave birth to a baby girl whom she left in the forest. The father Vishwamitra too refused to give shelter to the baby. This girl was later adopted by the bachelor saint Kanva and was named Shakuntala. In another story, Urvashi was sent to distract King Pururava. In many of the traditional stories, the woman has also attained divinity and is worshipped as a goddess. Durga and Kali are both goddesses of power, Lakshmi is the goddess of riches and Saraswati is the goddess of learning.

The oral literature of India and the story telling tradition have a strong linkage. The storytelling sessions were part of the festival celebrations. There are two festivals in north India where the special relationship between a brother and sister is celebrated. On *Rakshabandhan* day, the sister ties a symbolic thread called *rakhi* on the wrist of a brother, and even a non-relative whom she regards as a brother. On *Bhai Dwij*, she puts a symbolic red mark on the forehead of a brother. At the time of distress, the brother is expected to rush to the sister's help. During these festivals, stories connected with the sanctity of this relationship are told to both boys and girls. One such story is *Saat Bhai Champa* (Champa and Seven Brothers) where Champa rescues her seven brothers.

In traditional Indian literature for children, "the ideal woman is sweet-natured and one whose mere presence brings happiness to her husband and to all around her. She is always contented and never brings to her mind even the image of any other person save her own husband, whom she wor-

ships as a God. Even when he ill-treats her she serves him with the same devotion as she does her children. She runs the house ably and considers her husband her life. With ever smiling face she attends to him and his parents. She takes care of guests as well as other people who come in contact with her. If there is heaven on one side and the happiness of her husband on the other, she chooses to vote for the latter, and does not betray her husband even under the worst possible circumstances." When the woman is not an ideal one, then her image is often negative and she is portrayed as a witch, temptress or a mean step mother. A woman, according to the scriptures, always needs protection. As a girl, she should be protected by father and brother, when married, by husband, and in the old age, by the son. All rules appear to have been laid from the point of view of a man.

In the nineteenth century, a clear change is discernable when the books specially prepared for children were published. The concept of children's literature as a separate discipline came to India from the west. Contact with European countries, and particularly with England and the English language, gave an impetus to the growth and development of modern literature for children. At the same time, the tradition continued to have a hold on the minds of Indian writers and publishers. Even women writers were so conditioned that they also wrote male-oriented stories.

In nursery rhymes, stories and rewritten folktales, the girl characters emerged, but their image as a weaker sex continued to persist. The girl was expected to cater to the needs of her brothers, father and husband even by denying herself ordinary comforts and her own basic needs. Such sacrifices on the part of a girl were considered virtuous. A Hindu poet went to the extent of saying,

*Abla jeevan hai tumhari yahi kahani
Anchal mein hai doodh aur ankhon mein pani.*

(Ah woman, this is the story of your life
You have milk to nurse and tears in eyes).

Another genre of children's literature-historical fiction came to be written. Poems and biographies of eminent women began to appear. Stories based on real lives of heroines from history were favourites with some authors for children. The epic *Jouhar* (S.N. Pandey, Hindi) is the story of Queen Padmini. Padmini upheld the honour of womanhood by jumping into the fire and burning herself along with other women, rather than allowing the Khilji invaders to dishonour them in the absence of their husbands. The epic story of self-immolation was perceived as an act of bravery. The poem titled *Jhansi Ki Rani* (Queen of Jhansi, S.K. Chauhan, Hindi) describes the valour of the Queen, who led the battle against the enemy forces and held them at bay for a long time. Sword in her hand, riding a horse with a child tied to her back, the Queen led her troops in the battle. The rhythm of the poem with its tongue-twisting words has made very popular with children, even today.

Another historical story of Panna, the wet nurse of a prince, is an unparalleled example of loyalty and sacrifice. One night, nurse Panna came to know that the enemy king was coming to kill the prince. She acted fast and exchanged the clothes of the prince with those of her own son and put her son on the bed of the prince. The enemy killed Panna's son in front of her eyes, but she had saved the real prince.

Modern literature for children in India can be said to have received impetus with the establishment of Children's Book Trust (CBT) in Delhi in 1957, which became a trend-setter for all publishers. Shankar, the founder of CBT wrote *Sujata and the Wild Elephant* (Shankar, CBT, 1965), one of the first titles where the girl child Sujata is the main character. Sujata is a country girl who goes everyday to collect firewood from the Jungle. She feeds a wild elephant with bananas and makes

friends with him. One day, the elephant enters the village and plays havoc. As villagers run for their lives, Sujata comes forward, calms down the elephant and sends him back to the jungle.

The picturebook *Shobhana* (Margaret Kidd, CBT, 1968) brings gender equity in to focus and portrays both a girl and a boy on an equal footing. Following this, several girl-oriented books were published and the image of the girl child took a significant turn. Young girls began to be portrayed differently and stories were written on a girl's life at home and at school. The grown-up woman working in the office, as a teacher in the school and taking up other professions, now provided themes for the new stories.

The International Women's Year (1975), the Year of the Child (1979), SAARC Year of the Girl Child (1990), the International Year of the Girl Child (1991) and now SAARC Decade of the Girl Child (1990-2000) have all contributed in creating a new awareness about the status of the girl in society. This has influenced writers and publishers both. As a result, there has been a sudden spurt of books bringing the woman to the centre stage. *My School* (Sigrun Srivastava, CBT, 1978), a picturebook for pre-school children depicts the life of a girl at school where boys and girls study and play together. Their teacher is also a woman. *Chandipur Jewels* (Nilima Sinha, CBT, 1980) is a prize-winning full-length fiction. It is an adventure story where the girl Munia leads other children out on a treasure hunt.

In the rewritten folktale *Kirtisena* (Shankar, CBT, 1982), a young married woman stands up against the cruelty of her mother-in-law. When her husband is away, she wears her husband's clothes one night to disguise herself and leaves the home. After braving many difficulties, ultimately she meets her merchant husband.

Madam Rides a Bus (Vallikanan, National Book Trust (NBT), 1982), is a picture book where an eight year old girl rides a bus and has interest-

ing experiences. *A Visit to the City Market* (M. Padmanabhan, National Book Trust, 1986) is a picturebook, without any text, depicting a girl's visit to the market.

In 1985, CBT and UNICEF organized a competition for the writers of children's books on the theme of portraying boys and girls as equals. This led to the publication of 12 books for different ages. It is interesting to note that most of the stories in these books are brother and sister stories, showing that if the opportunity is given, girls will also succeed in doing what boys can do, like playing games, climbing trees and rowing a boat.

A picturebook, *Tree Growers* (Manorama Jafa, Ratna Sagar, 1989) presents the story of school children who grow trees around their school, and a girl comes forward to take care of the trees when some boys fall ill.

In modern literature, the biographies of eminent women have gained an important place. Several women played leading roles in the struggle for freedom in India. The lives of these women provided fascinating materials for biographies-

Kasturba Gandhi, Sarojini Naidu, Kamla Nehru and several others. A large number of books and stories on the life of Indira Gandhi have been written in all Indian languages. The only child of her parents, Indira Gandhi took active part in the struggle for freedom at a young age. She met Feroze Gandhi, fell in love and married him. She continued to lend a helping hand to her father Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of free India, in his political work. Over the years she became an active political leader, and later served as Prime Minister of India for seventeen years.

The change in the image of women in Indian literature for children has taken place largely in English books. Books in other Indian languages still largely portray the old traditional image of women. In English books and their translations in Indian languages, the girls now play a positive role. They do almost everything that the boys do. They go to school with the boys, gain knowledge and skills, take up professions, and embark on an independent career of their own.

Children need suitable stories reflecting traditional beliefs and modern values.

- Judith Weedan